

Free Libraries Zindabad

Quarterly Round up of Network News

Issue 8 | Oct- Dec 23

Is the library a free and safe space, especially for historically oppressed communities?

What are libraries? Why are they there? Who are they for? When we look at a library in the Indian context, an image emerges of a library filled with academic books for which members have to pay a fee, meant for a privileged few. In modern times, the Indian Public Library, which is located in most of the universities/institutions, has become like a museum in the eyes of the public, where we can only see the books kept in the shelves.

We see a different library. We believe that free libraries are the right of all, where everyone can read the books of their choice, sit in the library, talk about the rights and difficulties of their communities, especially marginalized communities who have been deprived of their rights, and deprived from opportunities and resources that can help them grow powerful.

As an independent and free library, we get the opportunity to read the struggles of Phule, Ambedkar, Shahu, Periyar and Fatima, who created a space for such a community where, today, you can bring forward the voices which fight against exploitation. Voices that can agitate for education, freedom, libraries and the right to read for all.

As the libraries of Free Libraries Network, we stand together for equal rights, where all, children, people from all communities, especially marginalized groups, seamlessly heal from trauma, come together in a safe space, resist violence and experience joy & liberation, read books of their choice, play and explore ideas & opportunities.

As a library network, we dream of creating more libraries that are free and anti-caste, where historically oppressed people, communities and children can think, read and learn. By doing so we can get a free, safe and inclusive place to share our thoughts; where children, youth, women and people of all identities can spread the wings of possibilities and explore their opportunities.

Amit Gautam

Working Group- FLN

Savitribai Phule Village Library & Resource Center, Uttar Pradesh

WE ARE FLN!

FLN members work to build, operate and propagate free libraries that welcome all without prejudice of caste, class, religion, gender & sexual identity, or disability. We strive to ensure free access to books for all and nurture new readers, who may not have the means to do so themselves.

Website- <https://www.fln.org.in/> | Twitter [@FreeLibNetwork](https://twitter.com/FreeLibNetwork) | Insta: [@freelibrariesnetworkfln](https://www.instagram.com/freelibrariesnetworkfln) | Facebook: [@freelibrariesnetworkFLN](https://www.facebook.com/freelibrariesnetworkFLN) You Tube: [Free Libraries Network FLN](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)
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FLN Events and Workshop

RESIDENTIAL WORKSHOPS - RIGHT TO LIBRARIES



Image: Poster calling for application for residential workshops

The Free Libraries Network has conducted a series of immersive 3-day residential workshops titled 'Library For All: Delivering The Right to Read'. Thanks to support from JCB Literature Foundation, these workshops were offered free to all Network members, wherein FLN was able to subsidise travel and cover all participation costs. The workshop was designed to help practitioners situate library curriculum within a rights-based discourse and offered training on reading strategies, best practices and standards & guidelines for excellent and inclusive library services to all. These workshops allowed FLN libraries to

come together to support each other, learn and reflect on why free libraries matter and their role in empowering the communities they serve. The workshop serves as a learning lab with special focus on curriculum & practices that welcome first generation readers and excluded communities. The workshops were delivered in Hindi, English and Assamese and offered space to Urdu, Santhali, Bengali, Garo, Khasi and Bhojpuri as well. In November & December we completed two residential workshops in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) and Guwahati (Assam). In January the third and last instalment of this workshop will take place in Chennai.

Bhopal|20- 22nd November

Over 43 FLN Libraries from Maharashtra, Haryana, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar came together, to sing, play, debate, reflect and learn about Library practices, reading strategies and responsibilities of a free library.



Image: Group photo from Bhopal Workshop

"3 days in Bhopal, sharing everything with everyone, from breakfast to dinner, was a beautiful experience. Thank you for an opportunity to create everlasting memories, share thoughts and experiences for 3 days and learn practical, ethical, skill-based knowledge that I can share with my community" - Pankaj, Rang Karwaan, Uttarakkand

"Even before starting a story we should encourage discussions among children, so they feel connected with the story or book. Poems and songs increase engagement and attachment with the library. We should also have different types of activities - that are related to the books. We should not hesitate taking up read alouds with books on serious topics- but should be mindful that how we present it" - Nisha Tripathi Savitri Bhai Phule Fatima Shelik Library

"While setting up a library, we should first welcome members and organize subject based activities to create an atmosphere of engagement and curiosity. We need to be prepared before read alouds. We should plan what story, read the story, prepare a lesson plan and have clarity on how we are going to take this story with children. We need to pause, ask open questions, see how children are engaging, how involved they are." - Muskan Mansuri, Savitri Bhai Phule Fatima Shelik Open Library, Bhopal



Image: Session in progress in Bhopal Workshop

Guwahati, Assam | 1- 3rd December

Over 30 FLN Libraries came together for this workshop. Here we saw many more languages and managed to deliver the main trainings in multiple languages including English, Hindi, Assamese , Bangla, Santhali. Bhojpuri, Garo and Khasi. Along with singing, dancing and playing, we workshopped why strategies like read alouds, book talks and storytelling can be tools to promote justice.



Image: Group photo from Guwahati Workshop

"This was different from the previous workshop. Language barrier was reduced, it was nice to hear so many languages. Learning about read alouds was new, I want to try that. The workshop should be longer and should include exposure visits to other libraries"- Biku, Chandraprabha Saikiani Feminist Library & Resource Centre, Assam

"My perspective for books has shifted since coming here. After making my library card I read a book, and then I wanted to read more. This happened during the workshop. I see this as an andolan. Sometimes we limit it to our own libraries, but now I am seeing this as an andolan."- Sujith, Prayatan, West Bengal



Image: Reading and Reflection in Assam Workshop

"My journey in library hasn't been long but FLN has played a significant role in it. I have connected with people through the network so I can now reach out to people whenever I am stuck. I hope we keep doing such workshops. I appreciate the methods followed because everyone got to participate." -Pulak, Muktagar, Assam



Author Talk | Conversation with P Sainath | 2 Nov 23

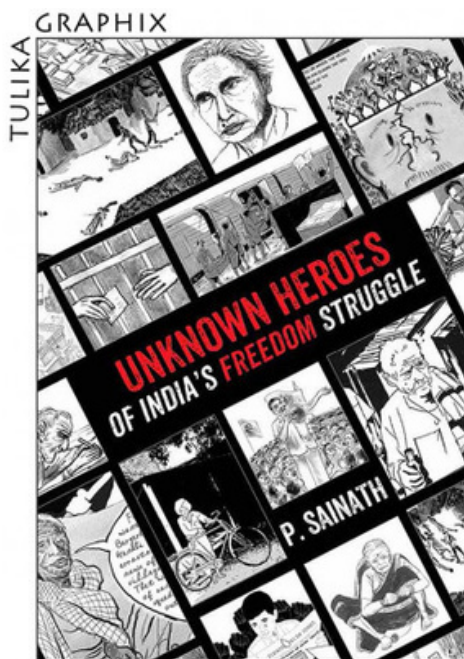


Image: Cover of Graphic Novel: Unknown Heroes of India's Freedom Struggle

As part of our 'Meet The Author' series, FLN members had a wonderful discussion with author P Sainath. Magsaysay award winner and author of *Everyone Loves A Good Drought*, he is the founder of PARI (People's Archive of Rural India- an online platform reporting stories from rural India). The conversation, which focused on Sainath's new graphic novel in collaboration with 16 Indian illustrators "*Unknown Heroes of the Indian Freedom Struggle*" was moderated by FLN leader Amit Gautam and Zoya from The Community Library Project and saw over 100 participants. Earlier this quarter, Parag Initiative (Tata Trust) worked with publisher Tulika Books to send over 60 FLN member-libraries a copy of the book. The book is derived from P Sainath's previous works (including *The Last Heros: Foot Soldiers of India's Freedom Struggle*) and has been crafted to be more accessible and relatable to all, especially younger readers.

The graphic novel will soon be released in 12 local Indian languages.

In this talk, P Sainath reminded us of how India was built, driven by mass movements, peoples' struggles and the contributions of many. He talked about the harms of colonisation and how our history is recorded, prioritising some narratives while ignoring others. Through 15 stories in this book, it seeks to honour the contributions of the many marginalised communities and their leaders in building the India we live in today.



Image: Screenshot from Meet the Author series: feat P Sainath, Amit Gautham and Zoya

During the talk and the Q&A session that followed, P Sainath discussed the role of free libraries, the roles libraries can play as custodians of all voices and in expanding mainstream narratives about this country's historic struggle for freedom. Other discussions included the importance of preserving oral histories, Sainath's experiences gathering tales for this book, the idea of public funding for community libraries & more. Watch the full video on FLN's YouTube channel. (@freelibrariesnetworkfln3274 | Free Libraries Network FLN)

Links: Full talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epQqJMt9Y-c> | PARI website: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/> | Link to book: <https://www.tulikabooks.com/tulika-graphix/unknown-heroes-of-india-s-freedom-struggle.html>

FLN THINKING CIRCLE 1 | Oct 14

Free Libraries Network organised the first of a series of webinars-cum-engagement sessions called Thinking Circle for its members. This is a space for all FLN libraries to come together and think more deeply about the role of free, community libraries that are accessible to all in our country. Ultimately, FLN wants all its librarians to emerge as thought leaders on community libraries.

The first thinking circle was a reflection on "Why should we think about a national library policy?". There was a discussion on fundamental rights under the Constitution, how libraries are places to fulfill these rights, and how to reimagine access to libraries as a constitutional right. We also thought together what we would want from a government policy in order for the state to build free, just and inclusive libraries for all.

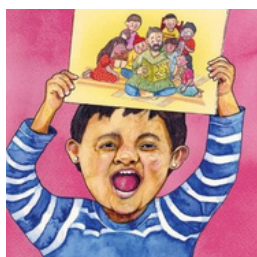
All members provided insightful feedback grounded in the challenges they have faced in their own libraries. This feedback will be accounted in the people's library policy that FLN is currently working to create.

This was the first of series of such forums, with more planned in 2024.

Book Nook

FLN Libraries Recommends

Round up of a few books about libraries from India and around the world used in demos and evening library in the residential workshops

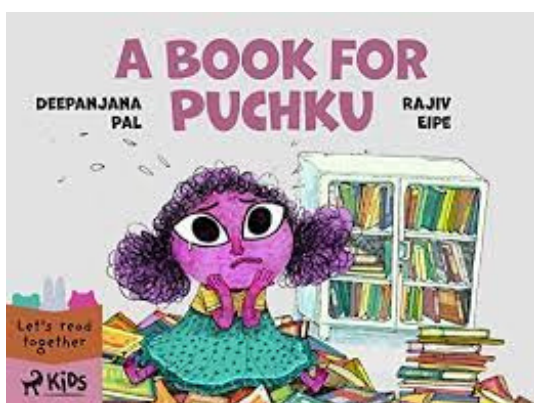
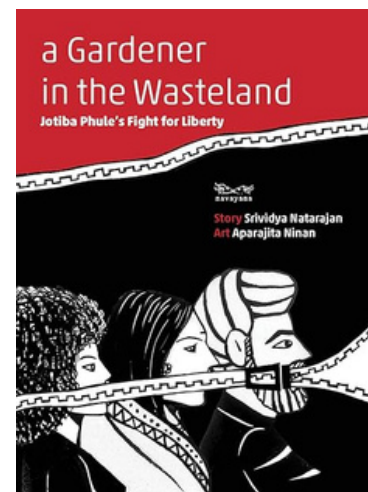


Our Library, Author Raviraj Shetty, Illustrator: Deepa Balsavar | Publisher: Pratham

What does your library look like? A place to hear stories? Can one play in the library? Is it only for adults? Only for children? What do you like to do in the library. In this book read about "our library" - the things you can read, do and see.

**A Gardener in the Wasteland, Author: Srividya Natarajan
Illustrator: Aparajitha Ninnan | Publisher: Navayana**

In 1873, Jotirao Govindrao Phule wrote gulamgiri (slavery), a scathing, witty attack on the Vedas as fantasies of the Brahman mind which enslaved the shudras and atishudras. In this book, Srividya Natarajan and Aparajitha Ninnan breathe fresh life into Phule's graphic imagination, weaving in the story of Savitribai, Jotiba's partner in his struggles producing a manifesto of resistance.

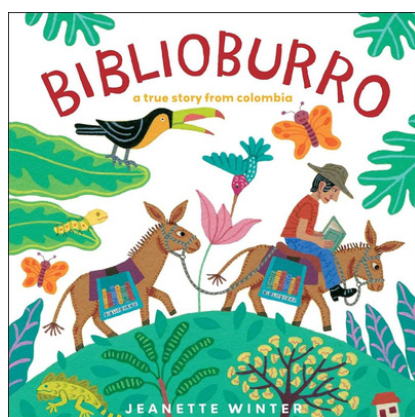
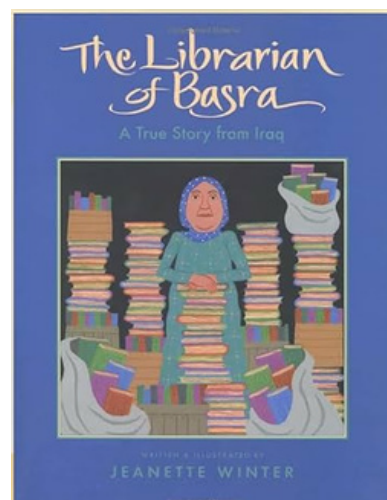


A Book for Puchku , Author: Deepanjana Pal Illustrator: Rajiv Eipe | Publisher Pratham

Puchku has run out of books to read. Then she discovers more books in the top shelf of the library bookcase. But Puchku is small, and the bookcase tall. How will she ever get to her beloved books?

The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq, Author Jeanette Winter | Publisher: Clarion Books

From Iraq, a story on one brave librarian facing imminent war and how respect for knowledge knows no boundaries.



Biblioburro, Author: Jeanette Winter Publisher | Publisher: Beach Lane Books

Story of a man and his travelling library in Columbia, bringing stories to those that cant reach them.

Please write to madhumita.rajjan@gmail.com for feedback, queries and if you would like your library or work to be featured in the newsletter